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Caste and the Desire for Belonging

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Abstract: *Questions of power and competition have figured prominently in the expanding debate about Dalit assertion. This article moves beyond the rhetoric of caste wars to engage with the affective and emotional dimension of caste. The focus is on the urban environment, where caste unity is challenged by the centrifugal forces of urban living. The article demonstrates how Khatiks in Bhopal are reunited through a festival culture that straddles class differentiation, factional politics and generational gaps. The emerging formation signifies the continuing strength of caste sentiments in the city and demonstrates how Dalits create arenas for publicly declaring pride in their heritage both within and beyond the political arena.*

Keywords: *caste, India, Dalit, city, performance, Hindu temple, ethnicity*

Introduction

Caste in India is undergoing rapid transformation, but has not necessarily taken the route laid out by a postcolonial political vanguard, which had hoped that modernisation would lead to abandonment of what was classified as ''traditional'' identity. Caste ideologies flourish as reified identities in struggles for justice and equality. Away from the noise of public caste wars, people have created a range of niches for reworking caste identities in a rapidly changing social environment. While caste discrimination is not a thing of the past, the reassembling and refiguring of caste have facilitated the experience of solidarity and empowerment, for Scheduled Castes among others.

This paper examines a case study from Bhopal, analysing the refurbishing of Khatik identity in the postcolonial setting.[1] It demonstrates how new caste elites reinstate Khatik identity in the urban discourse, by focusing on an idealised image of heritage and kinship. Caste as a positive notion sidesteps questions of hierarchy to declare pride in caste traditions. Such narratives proceed from a nostalgic discourse

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that reinvents the past as an age of solidarity, and modernity as a threat to it. ''Proud to be a Khatik'' is not merely a political statement, but also an expression of a desire for belonging, translated into the effort to produce social cohesion against the centrifugal powers of urban living.

Caste analyses have tended to emphasise hierarchy and power as the defining characteristics of caste as a sociological entity. Against this trend I wish to assert the affective and emotional dimension of caste. Caste is a passion and a compulsion. It informs ideals of belonging, defines relationships and circumscribes duties. By engaging with the performative dimension of caste I explore the reformulation of caste as a project of a culture in the making.

I present my argument in three steps. I begin by introducing performative empowerment as a significant urban development of Dalit self-assertion, which has received little attention in the literature. Second, the case study of Khatiks in Bhopal is presented. I introduce the community, discuss the centrality of the Kali Temple for rejuvenating caste relations, and recount the unifying force of new and traditional caste celebrations. Furthermore, I highlight the significance of a new emerging middle-class leadership in this process of re-crafting caste. The conclusion reflects on caste as a reified identity that bears some resemblance to ethnicity.

Caste, Hierarchy and Power

Hierarchy and power are the dominant topoi informing interrogations of caste. Dumont (1972) set the scene with his assertion that in India *homo* is *hierachicus*. His highly influential study defined caste in terms of a hierarchical system structured along the dichotomy of pure/impure. His essentialised description, however, was criticised for overstating the consensual nature of social rankings, for missing the complexity of caste relations and for ignoring historical changes (Cohen, 1968; Dirks, 1989a; 1989b; 1987; Deliege, 1993; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1960; 1967; Quigley, 1999 [1993]; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994). While Dumont's theory of caste has been rejected, questions of hierarchy, power and conflict continue to occupy a central position in discussions of caste. This is also true for research on scheduled castes (Arun, 2007; Ciotti, 2006; Säävälä, 2001).

Here I am particularly concerned with assertive self-presentations from below. Reacting to Dumont, scholars have stressed that the notion of a single caste hierarchy has no universal appeal.[2] Judgments about caste hierarchy vary depending on who makes them. Like all other castes, Dalits express pride in their heritage. This is reflected impressively in origin myths, which recollect how ''untouchable'' castes lost their high status through foolishness, treason, chicanery or self-sacrifice. Scheduled Castes refuse to view themselves as less worthy, projecting an image of pure origin and expressing the hope of regaining their rightful status in the future (Deliege, 1993; Gellner, 1999; Gupta, 2000; Sahay, 2004).

In recent years the debate has turned to the political assertion of Scheduled Castes. There are detailed accounts of the successful rise of Dalit parties since the 1980s (Jaffrelot, 1998; 2003; Pai, 2002). We find elaborate reflections on reservation politics (Burman, 1992; Engineer, 1991) and research on the connection between local caste traditions and political mobilisation (Béteille, 1992; Michelutti, 2004; 2008). The main thrust of the debate is summed up succinctly by Dipankar Gutpa

(2004; 2005), who contends that in the political arena caste has moved from an assertion of hierarchy to a triumph of identity. Caste continues to constitute a platform for competition. However, in their new guise, caste assertions and caste alliances are designed to supply numbers and deliver political influence and economic empowerment.

In this article I take up the notion that subaltern castes are proud of their heritage and assertive in the public arena. However, I move from political assertion to the much neglected area of emotional engagement and festival culture. The strong focus on democratic activism and reservation politics has narrowed the debate to questions of conflict and competition. Against this trend I demonstrate that pride in caste traditions also has significance beyond the struggle for political and economic gain. Engagement with caste is informed by a sense of common heritage and "natural" solidarity. It anchors people in a cultural universe. I illustrate how community is evoked during engaging performances that celebrate caste as a fundamental category of belonging.

By focusing on performance I treat caste not merely as a sociological category, but as something emergent, which is re-generated through enactment. Michelutti (2007; 2008) has convincingly demonstrated the intimate connection between the political identity of the Yadav caste[3] and male activism in the public arenas. Vigorous political action provides Yadavs with a sense of caste strength and communicates to the outside world an image of a unified caste. The public staging of a fierce, strong and proud caste is fed by and feeds back into other domains that nurture and define caste, such as marriage patterns, genealogies and mythologies of origin. Khatiks, on the other hand, have no comparable political identity. The loyalties of political activists are divided, and span the whole political spectrum, with a strong bias towards the Hindu nationalist party BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party). However, the lack of a unified political body operating under a caste label does not imply the absence of performative assertion. Khatiks in Bhopal represent their caste as a cultural unity and phatic communion. Festivals in particular generate an overarching frame that straddles class differentiation, factional politics, gender distinctions and generational gaps. The emerging formation signifies the continuing strength of caste sentiments in the city. This strength is not a purely political project or predicated only on reservation politics. Khatiks no doubt exploit caste relations for personal benefit and take advantage of positive discrimination. However, caste is not merely an instrument exploited for economic or political gains. Caste is invoked as a "tradition" that serves to anchor identity.

This is a remarkable phenomenon considering the challenges caste unity faces in the urban environment. Disintegration is propelled by increased occupational differentiation, growing class distinction and dispersed living, as well as non-conformist practices such as inter-caste marriage or women's emancipation. How do caste practices and caste ideologies en/counter these divisive forces? While scholars regularly remind us that caste is continuously adapted and updated (Fuller, 1997; M. Mines, 1996; Säävälä, 2001), the re-configuration of caste in cities is notably under-researched. However, there are indications that the diminishing economic and social functionality of caste in the city does not necessarily lead to a demise of caste as a meaningful social universe. Holmstrom (1972) observes practices of caste "hypersymbolism" (Gupta, 2000, p. 143) in Bangalore that vigorously reinstate

caste distinctions in an arena where class – rather than caste – structures economic relations:

> These differences [between castes in the city] do not amount to much in practice. Little details of the wedding ceremony, or caste reputations, are given an inflated importance simply because there is nothing else left to distinguish one caste from another, when most people's job has no relation to their caste. Just to be different is a matter of pride, though the difference may be trivial (Holmstrom, 1972, p. 770).

A more recent example of the resilience of caste ideology is provided by Fuller and Narasimhan (2008), who studied marriage alliances among the Brahmin sub-caste of Eighteen-Village Vattimas in rural and urban Tamil as well as overseas (USA). Long-distance migration and the desire for compassionate marriage challenge traditional marriage practices. Vattimas address these developments by creating new styles for negotiating partnerships, thus bolstering (sub-)caste as well as class solidarity.

As with these studies, I am interested in the re-assembling of caste traditions in radically altered environments. However, there is a significant difference between my case and the case presented by Fuller and Narasimhan. I focus on a formerly untouchable caste, located at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Why should Khatiks invest in a caste system that is the instrument of their subjugation? I argue that caste is projected as an in-group, which provides emotional security and a sense of heritage. Caste reform is a process of renewal designed to produce Khatiks as a respected entity, celebrated for contributing a unique tradition to a plural urban society. The restaging of caste as a reified identity shows remarkable resemblance to ethnic performances in multi-cultural contexts. Yet the outside projection remains inherently ambivalent. It simultaneously exploits traditional signifiers of caste respectability, projects political empowerment, and contains a democratic impulse that insists on the right of all castes to be proud of their tradition.

Khatik Caste

Khatiks are a caste of former meat and vegetable sellers. When they migrated to Bhopal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they settled outside the walled city in a separate neighbourhood near the South Eastern gate in a suburb called Budhvara. Their exclusion from the inner city was based on their status as untouchables. This spatial discrimination was mitigated in the post-Independence developments, when Bhopal experienced rapid growth and the formerly marginal neighbourhood became part of the crowded inner city.

Two changes in postcolonial Bhopal had a significant impact on Khatik lifestyle. New economic opportunities emerged in the rapidly growing city, while the reservation policies implemented by the Indian state meant that Scheduled Castes[4] were better positioned to gain admission to education and government jobs. Consequently, from the 1960s onwards, a few members of the community began to acquire middle-class status. Some climbed the social ladder by capitalising on their traditional occupations, networks and skills as vegetable sellers to become major

retailers in the large urban market. Others took advantage of the reservations offered, securing college education and state employment as well as other white-collar jobs. Less fortunate Khatiks explored new occupational opportunities in the transport sector or opened permanent shops in their local neighbourhoods. The rest continued their traditional line of work as butchers and mobile vegetable and fruit vendors selling at weekly markets.

Occupational differentiation led to a growing class divide and dispersed living. Some of the more privileged members of the community sought to disown their caste brethren, expressing pity for their poor caste fellows and disgust at their "dirty" habits. In an effort to align themselves with their new middle-class status and upper-caste colleagues they underwent a process of purification, abstaining from consuming meat and excessive drinking. Such practices were accompanied by relocation, with the more prosperous Khatiks leaving the overcrowded and stigmatised inner-city neighbourhood in favour of more gentrified surroundings. While there is still a substantial concentration of Khatiks in Budhvara, many caste members now live in the new outer suburbs. These people often observed that they now enjoy successful lives without depending on their caste fellows. There are mixed emotions accompanying this process. I regularly heard laments about the loss of the community and solidarity of the past. One of my informants observed:

> Today people are no longer able to give as much time to the caste as they used to before . . . There are different reasons for this. Development is one reason, others are education, the entertainment media and the fact that people have moved far away because of their jobs (Interview, Maljonia, 18 January 1997).

I pressed further, asking him to reflect more on the value and function of caste in contemporary India:

> The most important work of the caste bodies is to ensure the unity of the people, that they share all good and bad things, that there is peace and that disputes get resolved, that people do not fight and that they support and help each other any way they can (Interview, Maljonia, 18 January 1997).

To bring about such solidarity some members of the elite have made a conscious effort to reassemble Khatiks, for example during festivals and by founding caste-based institutions. Even among those who use all registers of class distinction to differentiate themselves from the common Khatik, some continue to invest in the relationship and expressed a deep commitment to the uplift of the community. In an interview, Bagware, a leading figure in the Bhopal caste, spelled out his aspirations for the caste.

> The *samaj* [caste community] is not for the protection of anyone's personal interest. It is for the protection of the entire community, for common causes. We have a community program for marriage. We also need a *dharmashala* [rest house as part of a temple] for Khatiks, so that they can stay near the goddess and express or solve their grievances. Finally I plan an educational centre for

poor Khatik children and scholarships (Interview, Bagware, 19 November 1996).

Such hopes and aspirations are thus translated into practical assistance through which more prosperous members act on behalf of and as part of the caste. In the next section I will further elaborate on this type of engagement and contribution of the Khatik elite and the way it has shaped caste-based institutions and enabled the caste to flourish in the urban environment of Bhopal. The entry point of my discussion is the Kali Temple, which has become a catalyst for rejuvenating caste relations: recreating caste as a ''community of feelings'' (Berezin, 2002, p. 39) and stimulating a sense of identity and belonging.[5]

The Kali Temple

Kali is the caste goddess of Khatiks. She is a common point of reference in the religious life of all families and is at the centre of the yearly ritual calendar of the caste. There is an old temple dedicated to her in the centre of Budhvara, which today is still considered the ritual heart of the community. However, the space in and around the temple is very congested and does not allow for any larger meetings to take place. In 1968 a group of Khatiks sought a solution to the problem of ritual space by permanently installing the goddess in a spacious new location on the bank of the small lake just outside the traditional neighbourhood. They initially built a small wayside shrine, but the place has undergone dramatic growth. Forty years of collective commitment and regular extensions have turned the temple into a major religious site that attracts worshippers from all over the city (see Figure 1; refer also to Rao, 2003).

The temple establishes the caste goddess of Khatiks in the centre of a new urban mainstream Hinduism in the making. It projects a positive image of a community positioned at the bottom of the social ladder. The temple is frequented by people from all castes and classes and buzzes with activity during the half-yearly celebration of Navratri [festival of the nine goddesses]. This is a remarkable development considering that until the mid twentieth century ''untouchables'' were banned from entering temples. In spite of legislation banning the exclusion of ''untouchables'' from sacred sites that was passed in many states shortly after India's Independence, religious discrimination often continued (Bailey, 1996). The Kali Temple breaks with this past. It bridges typical social divides and allows Khatiks to view themselves as part of the Hindu universe.

Khatiks are not only the legal title-holders of the site; they also consider themselves the owners of the ritual knowledge. They reign supreme in an institution traditionally associated with Brahmins.[6] This is not to say that they do not cooperate with the priestly caste. Brahmins are employed for the most important rituals (e.g. *arti, havan*), but they are treated as dependent employees. Their service is criticised regularly and they are dismissed at the whim of the governing body of the temple. In 2000, a temple priest who had served for many years was sacked when Khatiks found his style of singing no longer appropriate. On another occasion, the ritual specialist for the *havan* was dispensed with because he was reluctant to accept the ritual elements that Khatiks insisted on. Khatiks regularly scrutinise all ritual

Figure 1. Kali Temple, Bhopal, 2008. Photo by author.

activities; there is extensive gossip about religious services and regular exchange of personnel.

Khatiks may also opt to take on minor ritual responsibilities. Such roles are not formalised and may entail a number of different activities, such as accepting, offering and returning ritual gifts brought by devotees [*prasad*], acting as a medium for the goddess (possession), or providing ritual guidance for appropriate Kali worship. Khatiks' self assurance in all matters relating to the temple stems from their strong traditional link to the goddess. In practice, Khatiks possess a monopoly on Kali worship in Bhopal since there are no competing temples. This is due to the fact that in central India Kali has traditionally been venerated only by social groups at the margin.[7] As a bloodthirsty goddess of excess, Kali is considered extremely powerful in popular perception. Hence, her temples have quickly become very popular, especially among devotees who pray for divine intervention in their lives. The respect and fear Kali attracts enable Khatiks to offer their tradition as an auspicious contribution to urban life. The fact that their ritual service is accepted by all castes is an important source of reassurance that makes them proud of their heritage, as the following quote demonstrates.

> Through the construction of the Kali Temple our caste got a lot of respect and importance. The temple made Khatiks very popular. People started knowing who the Khatiks are (Dinesh Kirar, 5 March 1998).

The positive image that the impressive Kali Temple projects in the city is only the most visible sign of the powerful impact the institution has had on remaking caste identity. The ritual significance of the temple, its central location, and its spacious

design enable it to host events that celebrate Khatik heritage and solidarity. Khatiks meet there for major festivals of the ritual calendar, during marriages and for political rallies. Most events are arranged by new caste organisations that have developed around the temple. The first officially registered institution was founded in 1974 when the temple was under attack from the local government. A notice was issued that the newly-built temple hall was illegal and would therefore be destroyed by the local council. Khatiks mobilised to defend their temple. In this process a small group of college-educated youths became key players. They galvanised Khatiks into action to prevent the temple's destruction and to legalise the structure. A trust was founded and a trust deed written, a process that required a substantial amount of administrative knowledge accessible only to a few educated men.[8] The process seriously undermined seniority as the principle for structuring caste relations. While the older relatives of the activists were given membership of the temple trust, all offices were occupied by young college graduates. The new generation took control of the temple from the first moment and never relinquished it. Their subsequent activities became the catalyst for a gradual transformation of caste.

It might not have been foreseen during the founding days of the trust that the Kali Temple would become the most important caste institution in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Through the trust, power began to accumulate in the hands of the emerging professional class, who – empowered by their college education – were highly motivated to become the new leaders. They continuously extended their influence by inventing new organisational forms. Their activities reflect a desire to rejuvenate caste, while keeping social interference by lower class members at a minimum. The combination of social distance, emotional commitment and leadership ambition is demonstrated by the life trajectory of Shiv Narayan Singh Bagware, the president of the Kali temple trust.

Bagware is branch manager at the State Bank of India. He lives in a posh suburb in New Bhopal. All his children went to expensive private schools and had brilliant career starts in leading positions. He is proud that he has moved beyond the class status of most Khatiks and emphasises his economic independence. He stresses that the caste has no power over his behaviour. With glee he narrates the following events that demonstrate his invulnerability. Twice in the past he has been excommunicated from the caste because of his leadership style. He was accused of high-handed action when managing temple affairs. While the *panchayat* – the traditional governing body of the caste – had the power to expel him, it could not sustain the situation. Bagware was not affected by the excommunication. By contrast, it caused anger among all other middle-class Khatiks in Madhya Pradesh and the active members of the *panchayat* found their patronage networks severely affected.

While Bagware marvels at his independence from the *panchayat*, he also admits that he was emotionally upset by his exclusion. He continues to define himself as Khatik. To him caste means an extended group of relatives, people who owe each other solidarity and provide social, economic and emotional security to each other. He is generous towards caste fellows and helps them in areas that come under his influence. The exercise of patronage gives him a sense of purpose and a valuable resource for the exercise of power. He believes that he is a born leader and reasons that as an educated, successful member of his caste he is entitled to rule. His skills, he says, are crucial for making the caste fit for survival in the modern urban

environment. He discredits the traditional leaders' claim to authority through a cunning legalistic argument. Caste, he says – alluding to the Constitution – has no legal status in independent India. This means that decisions by the *panchayat* have no sanction and must be rejected as extra-legal. New forms must step into the void.

A registered society provided this new form. In 1976 a society called 360 Gautriya Kshatriya (Khatik) Samaj was registered, and Khatiks from the state of Madhya Pradesh were encouraged to become members. The aims of the society were defined broadly. The society would unify the caste, solve all caste problems and work to uplift the community.[9] In practice, the society's core activity became the organisation of regular ritual events. It holds the sacrifice during the half-yearly festival of Navratri, organises the traditional ritual event of Hariyali Amavasya, and makes plans for the get-together at Holi. Guests from outside Bhopal are particularly attracted to the yearly "match-making meeting" [*parichit sammelan*] and the mass marriage event. The new society did not replace the traditional governing bodies of local *panchayats,* but did facilitate a state-wide reassembling of caste at a time when the local *panchayats* were gradually losing influence. It has also prepared the ground for the formation of other institutions, such as a youth organisation (Sri 360 Gautriya Kshatriya Khatik Samaj, Yuvag Morcha) and two Khatik newspapers, *Maharaj Khatvang Express* and *Kal Manthan*.

The new institutions promote a notion of caste that is quite distinct from the concept of caste as a "natural" entity regulating the affairs of an endogamous group of born members within a social hierarchy. Caste becomes a moldable institution that is defined through the collective will of voluntary members considered to share a heritage. This point resonates with Rudolph and Rudolph's (1960) observation about an emerging politicisation of caste and its transformation into voluntary associations in the first half of the twentieth century.

> [A]t the organizational level, the caste association is moving away from the latent structure of caste, towards the manifest structure characteristic of the voluntary association. It has offices, membership, incipient bureaucratization, publications, and a quasi-legislative process expressed through conference, delegates and resolution. On the other hand, the shared sense of culture, character, and status tend to create solidarity of a much higher order than is usually found among voluntary associations where the multiplicity of social roles and the plurality of interest of its members tend to dilute the intensity of commitment and sense of identification (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1960, p. 9).

Rudolph and Rudolph recount the role of caste associations as mediators in an emerging democratic society. Caste societies deliver leaders to the political system and reconnect party politics to the grassroots. This process has gained momentum in contemporary India. However, caste associations are not just a function of politics. My argument directs attention to the aspect Rudolph and Rudolph take for granted – namely, the cultural homogeneity of caste and the resulting commitment. Habitual similarities are diminishing, yet sentiments of belonging appear resilient. In this setting, Khatik organisations mediate an experience of solidarity and caring in a festival culture. I demonstrate this with a case study from my observations at a recent match-making meeting at the Kali Temple.

Celebrating Caste

Khatiks began to hold match-making meetings in the 1990s together with an annual mass marriage. The events help Khatiks who have little economic and social capital to explore the marriage market. They are also a move to defend intra-caste marriage against growing class differentiation. The annual meeting in Bhopal broadens the horizons for potential alliances, promotes ties between urban and rural Khatiks, and opens avenues for spatial and social mobility. Today the Bhopal match-making meeting is a fixed event in the calendar. The last meeting was held on 21 December 2008. On that day huge posters near the temple announced the occasion and introduced passers-by to various Khatik organisations and their representatives. The marriage hall of the temple was decorated. A quarter of the space was taken up by a stage with a banner naming the occasion and its organisers. A table displayed three images – of Kali, Ambedkar and Maharaja Kathvang (see Figure 2).

The photographs symbolise major factions and ideological trends within the caste. People in the audience easily identified the various factions, and gossiped about the ego clashes between leaders. The Kali image emphasises the religious core and draws attention to the significance of the Kali Temple for Khatik activities in the state. Ambedkar's image represents the alignment of the caste with political agents that act in the name of Dalits. Maharaja Kathvang in turn stands for the desire to recover a lost Kshatriya [warrior] heritage. The picture also indexes a Khatik faction from the neighbouring city of Indore, which competes for leadership in Khatik matters with the Bhopal centre. During the function, all of these different voices coexisted. The stage accommodated religious, cultural and political messages and allowed contradictions to coexist. During the event, leaders of all factions rubbed shoulders on a crowded stage presenting the Khatik caste as an enormously powerful, energetic and dynamic group.

Facing the stage were chairs for the 400 or so visitors – women seated on the left, men on the right. The event unfolded as a series of greetings and speeches. Every person of some status in the caste was called forward, greeted, garlanded, and given

Figure 2. The stage with Khatik leaders during the 2008 "Match-Making Meeting" [*parichit sammelan*]. Photo by author.

a small trophy. Approximately one-third of the visitors made it to the stage. Supporters showed their respect for their local and regional leaders by dragging them to the stage and pleading with them to address the assembled public. Those identified as eminent personalities and leading individuals gave speeches in order of importance. The last speakers were the caste representatives in the state government. Caste members proudly count five Khatik Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and one Minister.

The event was inclusive and emotional. All speakers sang the praises of the Khatik community and paid homage to the Goddess Kali. They proclaimed enthusiastically that Khatiks are strong and proud and that the caste is moving forward like an engine, and roused the audience to join the litany of praise with repeated exclamations of ''Khatik Samaj ki Sindabad'', ''Jay Mata Di'' and ''Jay Kali Mata'' [''Victory to the Khatik community'', ''Praise to the Mother Goddess'', ''Praise to Kali'']. Between the exaltations, people listened, observed, chatted and gossiped. They identified their leaders on the stage and became acquainted with eminent personalities unknown to them. They moved through the hall to meet relatives from other parts of the state. Match-making occupied only a part of this noisy reunion. Society leaders set up a table where they collected forms with details from marriageable young Khatiks, which were then assembled in display folders for all to see.

After four hours of speeches and greetings participants went upstairs to share a meal. Before retiring from the site family groups visited the temple. The president of the temple trust was seated in his office on a stage in the style of an ascetic [*sannyasis*]. Families lined up and waited patiently to be received. One by one they approached the temple head, exchanged bows and received divine gifts of sacred rice. They were also handed a poster and a CD of the previous year's procession, which publicly celebrated the installation of new images of Shiva, Durga and Hanuman in the temple. These gifts transfer divine blessing. The CD provides further evidence of the splendour of the Kali Temple and the grandeur of the Khatik community. It attests to the affective dimension of kin relations and preserves the performative and political aspects of the festival. The documentary evidence of the spectacle was distributed, circulated and consumed like a marriage video (Sengupta, 1999). The gift of the CD and poster confers membership and provides the material basis for forging a collective memory.

The meeting is a transformative performance (Köpping and Rao, 2000; Rao, 2007; 2008). It conjures up the notion of Khatik unity and turns individuals and families into parts of a whole. Tambiah writes that the efficacy of ritual performances results from the ''use of multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively'' (Tambiah, 1979, p. 119). Enthusiastic chanting, bodily participation and a sense of immediacy through co-presence and a shared meal all contribute to an emotional experience of belonging and solidarity. The prospect of meeting relatives makes the get-together particularly attractive. As in a marriage, families affirm the significance of kin relations. The topic of match-making emphasises the notion of caste as kin. Traceable kin and imagined kin are fused by the performative experience that melds Khatiks into one social body.

However, emotive engagement does not eradicate conflict. I have argued elsewhere (Rao, 2003, 2009) that ritual processes are more complex than the

classical notion of *communitas* (Turner, 1969) suggests. The feeling of unity and the experience of conflict are often linked, and the ritual process accommodates both dimensions of social relations. Because rituals are acknowledged to affirm community, they are also used for asserting leadership claims, at times highlighting or even heightening power contests. During the match-making meeting there is a powerful subtext of conflict displayed on the stage. The pictures of Kali, Ambedkar and Maharaja Khatvang indicate typical fault lines in the caste. People gossip about factionalism and the vested interests of leaders. Yet restraint on all sides allows the sense of unity and strength to prevail. The celebration of extended kinship as a ''natural'' binding force confronts the daily experience of dwindling intra-caste relations. The event contributes to expanding the horizons of caste kinship across growing geographical distance. Belonging is confirmed through objects that anoint the body, mark membership and transfer the blessing of the goddess to a group of core devotees. Caste relations are reconfirmed and leadership recognition deepened. Most importantly, class distinctions are glossed over. Poor illiterate Khatiks share a room, a stage and a meal with MLAs and a Minister.

The experience is fleeting and needs to be repeated. The growing number of Khatik organisations ensures the regularity of such events. In addition, two Khatik newspapers contribute to the formation of a collective memory. They communicate across geographical distance about caste activities, births, deaths, marriages and outstanding achievements. Finally, caste identity has an anchor in the built environment. Khatiks are proud to own a temple, a location they belong to and that belongs to them. Khatik organisation, local media and the temple refocus what constitutes the heart of caste practice. Where the experience of caste as a close-knit social unit controlling social behaviour is dwindling, associations reinforce the notion of an in-group. While the material basis for defining caste is diminishing, emotions of belonging gain weight.

Caste as Affective Community

Celebrating caste, Khatiks create what Berezin has called a ''community of feeling'' (Berezin, 2002, p. 39). The term describes the efficacy of cultural performances in producing an affective identification with a polity. Berezin's article summarises recent trends in political sociology that pay more attention to emotional engagement as an essential part of making modern institutions. These include the strategic employment of spectacles of the state as well as oppositional energy channelled into social movements that redirect political passion. The discussion resonates with anthropological theories about rituals in politics. Rituals are described as effective performances with a traditionalising capacity. They create a political body and naturalise imagined communities by drawing participants into emotionally charged transformative experiences (Bloch, 1987; Geertz, 1980; Moore and Myerhoff, 1977).

I draw on this discussion to illustrate an emerging organisational form that emphasises performance of community as a salient feature of caste. The practice of caste as ritual communion is hardly radical or new. Ritual is a key to the Indian caste system and ritual performances always acted to promote caste communion. Khatiks produce new contexts for experiencing communion among an ''us'' – defined as people sharing a common heritage and culture. Ritual exhibits pride in

caste tradition. It is backed by the success of the temple as a source of respect. The reappropriation is not a free play of signifiers, "uncontaminated" by hegemonic discourse. Khatiks engage with their position as downtrodden through vociferous affirmation of a commitment to education and uplift. They also improve their public image through symbolic manipulation.

Khatiks project a Kshatriya origin when opportune. The claim to high birth is expressed through an association with Maharaja Khatvang or the wearing of stereotypical costumes such as turbans and swords. Some Khatiks have added the warrior title "Singh" to their name, to indicate descent from Rajput lineages. The drama of warriorness is an integral part of the choreography of a festival culture that demonstrates pride and strength. It is motivated by the recognition that a heritage as former untouchables continues to be viewed negatively. Identification as a warrior caste is an effort to escape stigmatisation and achieve respect through caste mobility. Yet, the move to identify as warriors is contested between the members of the different factions. There are many who insist that Khatiks must retain a separate unique identity, removed from hierarchical calculations that adopt the *Varna* system. The name of the most important caste institution signifies a compromise between the two factions. The title Sri 360 Gautiya Kshatriya Khatik Samaj indicates warrior [Kshatriya] heritage and Khatik origin.

Gutpa (2000) asserts that castes always expressed pride in their tradition. There is no guarantee, however, that the caste perspective is absorbed into the dominant discourse. Ursula Sharma speaks of Dalits as "muted groups" (Ardener, 1978), since their alternative narratives, which often reject the ascribed low status, have little or no bearing on dominant discourses (Sharma, 1994, p. 86). The urban experience nonetheless embodies the hope for change. The city as pastiche offers space for articulating divergent perspectives. Subaltern voices are not easily suppressed in the way that still occurs in villages, where dominant groups can keep strict vigil over public expressions of caste status (Bailey, 1996; Ciotti, 2006; D. Mines, 2005). Under these circumstances a new generation promotes positive engagement with caste. This happens in the political arena, where Dalit leaders direct the building of expensive and lavish memorials, thus inscribing Dalits into the official landscape of the nation (see Loynd, this volume). At the local level we find the reworking of caste identity through elaborate dramas with a "feel good" factor. The symbolic display is addressed to both Khatiks and the outside world. The powerful "new" Khatik community has potent symbols borrowed from past practices and imagined traditions.

Conclusion

> It is good to have the bonds of the caste. But if you progress beyond the caste then that is even better. I do not mean that one should leave the caste or separate or that one should join another group. This is not what I mean. It is good if one progresses. Backwardness should be removed. However, one should live together with affection and help each other, then other children can also study and can progress (Dinesh Kirar, 5 March 1998).

This statement underlines what I have argued above. Khatiks demonstrate the desire to achieve social mobility alongside caste solidarity – that is, to preserve the unity of

the caste by investing in novel organisational forms. New caste organisations gain visibility through performances that serve as platforms for a positive engagement with caste (see also Arun, 2007; M. Mines, 1996, pp. 65–83). The story has a particular twist in the Khatik case. Khatiks start from a position as ''downtrodden'', and while the majority of Khatiks remain disadvantaged this need not undermine the desire to value caste traditions and caste solidarity. Public display of caste pride is engineered by caste elites, whose experience of caste inequality and the harshness of caste hierarchy has been cushioned substantially by affirmative action and career success.

This active involvement and investment by various sectors of the caste illustrates that caste remains a valuable cultural entity. My argument does not deny the persistent significance of caste as hierarchy. I also acknowledge that political mobilisation is a major unifying force that shapes castes as identity groups in contemporary India. While these two positions are well explored in the literature, it is my aim to draw attention to the fact that caste is not exhausted in its political dimensions. This argument gains salience in an urban environment, where occupational differentiation, class distinction and dispersed living contribute to the disintegration of formerly close-knit social groups. Khatiks readily admit that today caste relations do not structure everyday life. Yet they also affirm that the caste community offers emotional support and has symbolic functions, demonstrated in the collective celebration of life cycle rituals such as funerals and marriages.

It has long been argued that caste shares traits with ethnicity (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994). The similarities certainly increase when, under the pressure of globalisation and urbanisation, caste and ethnicity undergo reification (Michelutti, 2008). In this process symbolic markers become paramount for articulating collective identity (Kapferer, 1988). These identity markers draw on a wide range of resources, practices and sentiments that nurture a sense of belonging – for example, through a festival culture that produces a ''community of feeling''. This sense of union is reinforced by the built environment and new institutional structures that anchor the collective identity. Khatiks' reconfiguration of their community takes on a form well known from diaspora communities (Fortier, 2006). Caste demands affirmation in a context that threatens to dilute it. It finds new existence in a cultural formation that emphasises ritual union and kinship. The ideology of heritage groups is sustained through the ongoing production of performative genres that reaffirm caste without insisting on economic homogeneity, ideological conformity or spatial proximity.

Notes

1. My interest in the Khatik community first arose during research on temple religion and temple politics, which I undertook in 1995 and 1996 (Rao, 2002; 2003). During the following years I regularly visited Bhopal and observed a deepening of engagement with modern caste institutions and a lively participation in caste events.
2. Scholars argue that Dumont's notion of caste replicates one particular Brahmanical interpretation of caste, which does not enjoy uncontested hegemony in Indian society (Berreman, 1991; Burghart, 1990).
3. The Yadav caste is not classified as a formerly untouchable caste. However, it is officially classified as economically backward (OBC, Other Backward Castes).

4. In independent India, the formerly untouchable castes were registered to provide them with special benefits. Members of Scheduled Castes are entitled to reservations in educational institutions and state employment.
5. I am uncertain about how much the experience of marginality as Dalits contributes to the desire to hold on to caste identity. Many middle-class Dalits complain about discrimination by colleagues, delayed promotion or social exclusion.
6. Traditionally "untouchables" were banned from entering temples. These practices were outlawed in 1949 when the Parliament passed the Temple Entry Act. However, the transition to more inclusive temple practices was not smooth and was full of conflicts and strife (Appadurai, 1981; Bailey, 1996; Fuller, 1984; Good, 1989).
7. Unlike in Bengal, in central India Kali worship has traditionally not been part of mainstream Hinduism.
8. Among Khatiks women are generally excluded from public activities and do not hold offices in caste institutions. Even educated Khatiks tend to hold on to traditional role models, assigning women to the roles of housewife and mother.
9. The statutes were published by Bagware in a locally produced booklet in 1996. The book is titled *Shri 360 Gauriya Kshatriya Samaj* and narrates the history of the temple and outlines the rules and regulations for the state-wide caste society.

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